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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000148

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR NEA/APRI, DRL/PHD (J.DAVIS, D.ABRAMSON)  
STATE ALSO FOR DS/IP/NEA, DS/IP/ITA

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SUBJECT: ARRESTS SPARK CONTROVERSY, SEND SIGNAL

REF: 04 MUSCAT 2226 AND PREVIOUS

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Summary  
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1. (SBU) Omani chat-rooms and dinner conversations have been dominated in recent weeks by widely held rumors that the security services have arrested a dozen Omani citizens in late-night raids spread across three separate regions. While the government has not publicly acknowledged the arrests despite increasing media attention, speculation focuses on possible religious pretexts behind the security measures. Names of 13 alleged detainees (most believed to belong to the predominant Ibadhi sect), and pictures of doors damaged in the police raids, have been posted to local Internet websites. A Paris-based Arab human rights NGO issued a statement January 23 condemning the "arbitrary arrests" in the Sultanate. Many Omanis take the events as sign that the government is closely scrutinizing religious activities that exceed its tolerance. End summary.

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Internet Spreads Consistent Stories  
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2. (SBU) Since December, 2004, rumors have run rampant in Oman concerning the arrest and detention of roughly one dozen Omanis at the hands of special security services, reputedly in a series of late-night raids on their homes. Local Internet chat-rooms (Al Sablah and Al Majara) have been abuzz for weeks with the reports, often posted by relatives or close friends of those alleged to have been captured in the security sweep. Embassy employees have heard numerous (and credible) second-hand reports of the arrests in their home villages and from close personal contacts. Broader Arab media, including the Al Jazeera, Al Arabia and Al Hurra news networks, have also reported on the arrests. Agence France-Presse has also published a report of unsubstantiated "rumors" about the arrests.

3. (SBU) Al Sablah and Al Majara have posted the names of thirteen individuals allegedly captured and detained by the security services, hailing primarily from three regions of Oman: Muscat, Dakhaliyah, and Sharqiyah. The names provided are as follows:

- Mohammed al-Gharbi, assistant lecturer, Sultan Qaboos University
- Dr. Ali al-Abri, university lecturer
- Dr. Jabir al-Sa'adi, lecturer, College of Shariah and Law
- Dr. Yusuf al-Sarhani, university lecturer
- Salih al-Rabkhi, Director of Mosque Affairs, Diwan of the Royal Court
- Zaher al-Alawi, Islamic preacher
- Ahmed Mohammed al-Harthy, teacher
- Said al-Harthy, former judge
- Mohammed al-Shuaili, religious supervisor at Sultan Qaboos University
- Salim al-Sa'adi
- Said al-Sagri
- Khalifa al-Mahrouqi
- Sheikh al-Numani

Sheikh al-Numani had appeared on earlier lists but was subsequently removed, presumably after having been released. While included on the list with the others, Ahmed Mohammed al-Harthy is widely reputed to have been arrested in connection with the shooting of a British citizen in 2004 that was believed to have been of a personal rather than political nature. There is also limited speculation that perhaps dozens of other Omanis have at least been questioned by authorities in connection with the arrests.

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Few Facts, Numerous Theories  
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4. (SBU) In the absence of formal charges or public acknowledgment of the alleged arrests by the government, speculation runs rampant on what the detainees may have done

to warrant this action. The most prevalent theories lean toward the detainees having held religious views that went beyond the government's comfort level. (Note: The last government crackdown of a similar scale took place in 1994, when dozens of government officials and other Omanis were arrested for alleged participation in a Muslim Brotherhood cell. All were subsequently pardoned, with several of them returning to senior positions. End note.) Without a firm basis of proof, the majority of the alleged detainees are believed to be Ibadhi Muslims and relatively young; many of them occupy leadership positions that put them in close proximity to impressionable Omani youth.

15. (SBU) While some Omanis fearfully speculate the detainees were plotting acts of terror, most presume that the detainees were somehow singled out for holding critical opinions about the government. One of the more credible theories suggests that the detainees are Ibadhi conservatives unhappy with perceptions that the government is downplaying the primacy of Ibadhism relative to other schools of Islamic thought. Apart from the alleged shooter Ahmed Mohammed al-Harthi, however, none of our contacts have imputed the other detainees with violent beliefs or natures. Pictures of at least one door allegedly busted down during the police raids have been posted on the Internet, and the widely held beliefs that the raids were conducted in the middle of the night have been a particular lightning rod of criticism.

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French NGO Condemns Arbitrary Arrests  
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16. (U) Paris-based NGO "Arab Commission for Human Rights" issued a statement January 23 following comments to the Al Jazeera network on the "arbitrary arrests" in Oman. According to its website, the ACHR was founded in 1998 by a group of 15 human rights advocates from several Arab states, not including Oman. (Note: An allegedly banned Omani writer, Abdullah al-Riyami (reftel), posted the ACHR statement to a local Internet site and gave an interview to Al Hurra, leading to speculation that he was behind the NGO's action. End note.) Our informal translation of the somewhat contradictory statement is as follows: (begin text)

The Arab Commission for Human Rights expresses its deep concern for the continuation of the series of arrests in the Sultanate of Oman which began 33 days ago and continued until the eve of Eid al-Adha.

The campaign of arrests included a number of geographical regions, mainly Muscat, Nizwa, al-Qabil, Bahla, Manah, and al-Hamra. Some of the arrested were renowned for their religious fanaticism, criticism of the internal situation, and verbal hostility to American policies.

Most of the arrests were made between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. when residences were stormed and doors broken, entering into bedrooms followed by careless searches. As direct result, children were psychologically traumatized by the signs of violence against their father, or their elder brother. According to a lawyer close to the ACHR, arrested persons are not exceptionally more religious compared to the ordinary level observed in the country. Further, there were no immediate threats nor involvement in armed violence or terrorism. Nothing is known about the fate nor the whereabouts of the detainees. They were allowed to contact their families only once on January 19, 2005. They were not indicted and (there are) no signs of any trial nor a role of the judicial authority.

The Arab Commission for Human Rights calls on the Omani authorities to stop all arbitrary arrests in the country, provide defense facilities for each defendant and to bring them to fair and public justice, and not to slip further into oppressive policing attitude for resolving political and social problems of the country.

Paris, January 23, 2005. (End text.)

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Best Guess  
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17. (SBU) Our more dispassionate Omani interlocutors point out that the security services are not in the habit of randomly arresting citizens without some reason, even if the pretext does not always hold up to the highest legal standards. The theory that the detainees were unhappy with government efforts to promote religious tolerance at the expense of Ibadhism's predominance strikes us as a distinct possibility, particularly given the fact that the government does indeed seek to avoid granting preference for any particular school of Islamic thought. Nevertheless, based on past experiences, there is a general expectation that the detainees will be eventually released with some vague warning not to engage in objectionable behavior or to divulge their experiences in

custody. Whatever the actual basis for the alleged detentions, a clear message has been received by the Omani public that the government is wary of any religious activity that could possibly undermine the public order or lead to sectarian tensions.

BALTIMORE